DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 215 CS 213 260

AUTHOR Ostrom, Hans
TITLE Surviving To Write and Writing To Survive: The Complex Case of Langston Hughes.
PUB DATE 20 Mar 92
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; Black Literature; College Freshmen; Discourse Modes; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Writing Skills; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; Bartholomae (David); Elbow (Peter); Expressive Writing; *Hughes (Langston); Social Constructionism; Voice (Rhetoric); *Writing Development

ABSTRACT

Studying the life of Langston Hughes in the context of how to teach freshman composition can shed light on two sometimes conflicting pedagogies, the expressivist and the social-constructionist. A discouraging period of fierce criticism, illness, depression, and financial woes coincided with Hughes' 39th birthday, which his biographer Arnold Rampersad described as a "season of humiliation and dispossession." Teachers of composition should look to Hughes's experience of tension and frustration as an allegorical model common to a vast majority of their students. This tension can be related to the conflicting pedagogies of freshman composition: those that stress discovery of voice (Peter Elbow) versus those that stress the navigation of discourse domains (David Bartholomae). Hughes's writing journey was that of an outsider, and to some degree all freshman writing courses are concerned with helping outsiders to certain modes of discourse. An example is the case of a student who experienced severe writer's block in completing an academic essay. By pointing out similarities with Hughes's traumatic struggles, this student was enabled to complete the work. Hughes's successes provide teachers with concrete models for encouraging students to succeed in the tricky business of producing quality college level writing. (HB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Hans Ostrom

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Hans Ostrom
University of Puget Sound
Tacoma, WA 98416

Conference on College Composition and Communication
Cincinnati, March 20, 1992

Paper Title: "Surviving to Write and Writing to Survive: The Complex Case of Langston Hughes," presented as part of a panel on "Loss and Recovery: Intertextuality and Writing Instruction"

Like a lot of us, I've seen how a multicultural perspective can energize first-year college writing. Unexpectedly, studying Langston Hughes in a project unrelated to composition has also changed my perceptions of the writing process and discourse communities. It's also shed light on two sometimes conflicting pedagogies, the expressivist and the social-constructionist.

I first glimpsed a link between Hughes and freshman writing when I read the second volume of Arnold Rampersad's biography, which picks up Hughes's life on his 39th birthday--February 1, 1941. Rampersad calls this moment of Hughes's life a "season of humiliation and dispossesion."

For starters, the republication of a satirical poem, "Goodbye, Christ," had drawn fierce backlash. Worse, Hughes's subsequent apologies for the poem brought attacks from former supporters, including other black writers and leftists. His books weren't selling. A drama project had disintegrated, and former collaborator, Zora Neale Hurston, had berated him. At 39, the former star of the Harlem Renaissance was broke, ill, depressed, and almost friendless.

ED344215

CS213240

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I found Rampersad's portrait of a disempowered, voiceless writer so compelling that I set aside my primary work on Hughes--studying his short stories--to look more carefully at his whole journey as a writer. I wanted to see the degree to which his journey might be one allegory of writing--specifically of freshman writing, where notions of empowerment and voice have been central for the last 15 years, and where many students face a "season of humiliation and dispossession."

As in allegory, the proportions of Hughes's journey would be much grander than those of a college student's, but I wanted to explore the parallels anyway.

When I looked at Hughes's journey, I discovered that the terrible low point of '41 was only a more extreme version of a tension that dogged Hughes his whole life--which was that writing both sustained and endangered him.

Writing gave him a life and a voice in circumstances that wanted him as good as dead and silent. Because he was black, the dominant culture didn't exactly beg him to write. Once he began to write, that culture didn't want him to continue because of what he wrote, which included such things as "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," "I, Too, Sing America," and "Good Morning, Revolution." Other less obvious pressures not to write existed, too: His hard-headed, materialistic father thought a writing career was stupid. His white patron in the Thirties, Mrs. Mason, came to think he was writing "the wrong thing," and cut him off.

A look at the whole journey also shows the degree to which Hughes encountered conflicts between his own voice (or vision) and the communities or audiences to which he wrote. And here his journey bears directly on sometimes conflicting pedagogies of freshman comp.--those that strees the discovery of voice (Peter Elbow) versus those that stress the navigation of discourse domains (David Bartholomae).

Hughes made his mark in part because he wrote against a dominant literary community. Just set his WEARY BLUES of 1926 against the poetry of Eliot and Pound and you'll get an idea of how much he was changing the terms of poetic discourse. He deliberately drew on an African-American tradition and created poetry out of blues, jazz, folk narrative, and street dialect.

But this assertion of "voice" became complicated, even treacherous. He was among the first to see that blues, jazz, and so-called Negro writing were finding a forum because they were seen as exotic, and he saw that asserting an African-American voice could easily be exploited in the publishing marketplace. The exploitation could then result in a loss of identity and voice. (The chapter, "When The Negro Was In Vogue" from his autobiography, THE BIG SEA, shows his astuteness on this issue.)

Hughes also saw early on that to survive as a writer meant mastering a spectrum of genres--poetry, lyrics, journalism, drama, fiction. Out of the sheer need to make

writing pay, Hughes became the most versatile writer of his generation--black or white.

But in the area of versatility, writing cut both ways, too. He did make it pay, but in mastering so many kinds of discourse, Hughes exhausted himself and also damaged his reputation, even among younger black writers for whom he paved the way--such as James Baldwin.

Studying what I loosely call the allegory of Hughes's career has not revolutionized my teaching of freshman comp. But I've found some important validation in his journey. More than once, I've felt that to emphasize expression and voice in freshman comp. was to imperil students later as they encountered alien, encoded discourse communities.

Just as often, I've felt that to train students to be rhetorical chameleons who can adapt to several discourses was to suppress their identities--to coopt their voices. So it's possible to ask the same questions about freshman writers as we ask of a pioneering writer like Hughes--questions that seem central to how we teach writing these days:

For instance, When does modulation of voice become loss of voice? Or, what's the price of becoming an adaptable academic writer? Or, how should we prepare students for the hostility they may encounter when they assert themselves against the grain of a discourse? Should we teach them to question the assumptions behind conventins of discourse? Or--to take a strict social constructionist

point of view--does any writer even have a solitary "voice" to begin with, and if not, how should we address the issue in first-year writing?

David Bartholomae describes such issues this way: "The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience. . . . He must learn to speak our language [that is, academic language(s)]. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff" ("Inventing the University," p. 135).

And now I'll close with an example from a recent class.

A student whom I'll call Chad (because that's his name) helped bring the Langston Hughes allegory into sharper focus last term. For two months in freshman writing, Chad had been one of those unproblematic writers who make the machinery of our jobs run smoothly. He did the work, he handled assignments with ease, he revised a lot, he got mainly Bs.

But toward the end of the term, he began work on our most academic essay so far, an analysis of a difficult book of essays by Gary Snyder, THE PRACTICE OF THE WILD.

On this assignment, the wheels came off for Chad. At first, neither he nor I knew how bad it was. Both the Writing Center and I did the usual things to help him get started on the assignment. Then I moved the deadline for him and spent even more time talking about ways to handle

the assignment. Finally, he came in and said that whenever he sat down to start the essay, he felt stupid.

Chad and I ended up returning to the idea of a writer's journey, something the whole class had touched on early in the term. I asked him whether he'd ever frozen up like this in high-school writing. Yes, he said--with a research paper, a paper with which he'd ultimately succeeded. We talked about ways of using that point of the journey to help with the present roadblock, or writer's block. But we also talked about how more formal academic writing seemed to intimidate him. I was tempted to tailor the assignment just to him and let him write a more informal, personal response to Snyder. But we went ahead with the original assignment, a more formal critique.

In one sense, it ended up being a rags to rags story. Even the final draft, which critiqued Snyder's ideas about the function of dance in culture, contained what Bartholomae would call weak mimickry: "Since history has been recorded we know that there has been dance." Bartholomae might say that Chad had failed to invent the university in this instance, even though he took a shot at inventing dance.

But in other ways, Chad had succeeded. He'd identified a conflict between himself and a kind of discourse; instead of centering the problem on what he called "his stupidity," he came to center it on the difficult book and the uncomfortable writing task. And he'd placed the episode in a long journey of writing, putting it in perspective.

"Keep writing and wait for the worm to turn" is what Langston Hughes's friend, Arna Bontemps, advised him in 1941. He was telling Hughes to write something he believed he could write and go from there. In a sense, that's one strategy Chad and I had devised. The real issue was not so much the essay on Snyder as it was interpreting the difficulty surrounding the essay, hollowing out yet another space in which self and discourse could exist.

We can't read Mike Rose's LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY or Tom Fox's THE SOCIAL USES OF WRITING: POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY without seeing how issues of power and literacy which shaped Hughes's career shape the lives of college students. Rose and Fox remind us of the degree to which mountains of race and class loom large in our field. If, as Bartholmae suggests, all first-year students are outsiders learning the discourse of the inside, then race, class, and gender must only exacerbate such basic outsider status.

But even for students like Chad whose lives are not as obviously on the boundary, writing cuts both ways. As it was with Hughes, writing can be a trickster figure in all students' lives. It can give identity and take it away. It can be a ticket to success one day and make them feel stupid the next. The ways in which Langston Hughes wrote to survive and survived to write have helped me help my students cohabitate with the trickster. Hughes's writing journey was that of an outsider, and to some degree all

freshman writing courses are about helping outsiders survive to write and write to survive.

References

David Bartholomae, "Inventing The University," WHEN A WRITER CAN'T WRITE, ed. Mike Rose (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 135-164.

Tom Fox, THE SOCIAL USES OF WRITING: POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

Mike Rose, LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY (Oxford University Press, 1989).

Arnold Rampersad, THE LIFE OF LANGSTON HUGHES, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986;1988). See especially the first chapter of Volume II.